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S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE

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HONOURABLE HOUSE OF COMMONS,

AT THE

CHURCH OF ST. MARGARET'S, WESTMINSTER,

ON FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 1778.

B E I N G

The Day appointed by His Majesty's ROYAL PROCLAMATION, to be
observed as a Day of SOLEMN FASTING and HUMILIATION.

By WILLIAM VYSE, LL.D. K

RECTOR OF LAMBETH.

L O N D O N:

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MDCCCLXXVIII.

Luna 2^o Die Martij, 1778.

ORDERED,

That the Thanks of this House be given to the Reverend Doctor VYSE, for the Sermon by him preached upon Friday last, before this House, at St. Margaret's, Westminster, and that he be desired to print the same: And that the LORD NORTH and the LORD WESTCOTE do acquaint him therewith.

J. HATSELL,

Cl. Dom. Com.

S E R M O N, &c.

DEUTERONOMY CHAP. xxiii. VER. 9.

**WHEN THE HOST GOETH FORTH AGAINST THINE ENEMIES, THEN
KEEP THEE FROM EVERY WICKED THING.**

IT is certain that mankind are under a perpetual obligation, as much as their imperfect nature will admit, to shun the paths of error and vice; and it is in a particular manner the duty of Christians, to be constantly upon their guard against the temptations of sin; yet it will not be denied, that there are some extraordinary occasions, and exceedingly critical times, which call for the utmost circumspection, and require us to be uncommonly vigilant in preventing deviations from our duty.

Such,

Such, for example, is the very serious and important occasion of the present solemnity.

We are again assembled, by Royal Proclamation, to implore the blessing of Almighty God upon his Majesty's arms, against his rebellious subjects in America; at a time too, when good and moderate men had flattered themselves with the pleasing hopes, ~~that~~ we might have met upon a different occasion,—to return thanks to Heaven, for bringing back a deluded people to a sense of their duty and allegiance.

Indeed, if the reasonable claims, and mild intentions of the Parent State, had been coolly and impartially considered, it cannot be doubted, that the calamities of war, aggravated by the tyranny of their Leaders, would long ago have procured a dutiful submission; such as would have led us all to the house of God as friends, to praise the Lord with the voice of thankfulness, and to rejoice before him with reverence.

Waiting that happy event, we may improve the intermediate time by turning our thoughts inwardly upon ourselves; with unfeigned humility; with deep contrition, should we acknowledge and lament the divine displeasure. It is our duty, and indeed the principal object of the pious devotion of this day, to fly from every wicked thing, to call our ways to remembrance, and acknowledge our dependence upon that Supreme Power, who ruleth over all the kingdoms of the earth, and to whom we are indebted for

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what we are, and for the blessings which by his liberality we have hitherto enjoyed.

It must be allowed by all, that national prosperity is, under God, the almost certain reward of national virtue; and that therefore the calamities, which any people may suffer, spring not out of the ground, but are the result and sure consequence of their vices. If we attend to what has passed in the world, we may plainly discover, that the changes and revolutions which have happened in it, are not so much to be ascribed to human power and policy as to a constantly super-intending Providence. Kingdoms, as well as private persons, have their dependance on God, and are accountable to him for their conduct. Nor is private vice and immorality more fatal to individuals, than public vice and irreligion to a State. A fruitful land maketh he barren, for the wickedness of them that dwell therein. Under any affliction or distress, the only sure means to obtain his favour, is an humble acknowledgement of his power, and a sincere resolution to obey his laws.

The same divine authority hath likewise pointed out to our notice, that whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written for our learning and admonition. If we consult those sacred oracles, we find his own peculiar people happy or miserable, according as they obeyed or transgressed his commands. Their prosperity was the reward of their observance of his laws, their distresses, their captivity, and final dispersion, the just punishment of their repeated provocations. Their law indeed was enforced chiefly by promises and threats of temporal good

good or evil, and the hand of Providence was more conspicuously seen amongst them than other nations. But we find, that the other kingdoms of the world, as far as the scripture history extends, were under the direction and influence of the same over-ruling Power. Dominion and rule were, upon account of their iniquities, transferred from one people to another.

An unrighteous Nation, obstinately persisting in it's wickedness, in defiance of the sure tokens of God's wrath, and even whilst under the pressure of a general calamity, will feel the increasing weight of his correcting hand, and drink still deeper of the bitter cup of his displeasure. If, at so awful a period, they turn not from their evil; and keep themselves free from every wicked thing, he will most certainly pluck them up, pull them down, and destroy them.

No nation under heaven hath greater reason to praise God than we have, for those many and invaluable blessings he hath bestowed upon us. The Constitution of that government, under which by his Providence we are placed, is the admiration and envy of the neighbouring kingdoms. Our possessions and liberties are secured to us by just and equitable laws, and those laws administered by Judges in the highest degree respectable for their knowledge and integrity. The fruit of our labours is ours freely to enjoy; the strong man armed is not permitted to spoil our goods; the sons of violence are restrained from hurting us. And let it be remembered, that we enjoy the free exercise of a national religion, as pure in itself as it is indulgent and affectionate, to all those who are of a different

different persuasion. God hath been pleased to deliver us from those heavy bonds of ignorance and superstition under which our fathers groaned for many ages, and as by that most happy event our religious liberties were secured to us, so by another of high importance in the last century he was pleased to confirm us in the full possession of our civil rights.

The favours which God graciously condescends to bestow upon any people will in the end but aggravate their guilt, and add to the weight of their punishment, if they do not make suitable returns of gratitude and obedience. But what reward, what return of this kind, have we given unto the Lord for all the benefits he hath done unto us? Highly distinguished in all temporal advantages, are we likewise pre-eminent in all moral and spiritual improvements? Is this our case at present? It would be flattering ourselves to our ruin to affirm it. For though we are not yet lost to a sense of many noble virtues, and though our known humanity and extensive charities do us honour, and may serve by covering the multitude of our sins to abate the warmth of general and indiscriminate accusation, yet it must not be dissembled that our zeal for religion is visibly on the decline, that our morals sit more loose upon us, and that the riches of this commercial state, spread over the land in a too sudden and unbounded profusion, have brought forth the rank weeds of an enfeebling and destructive luxury. An impatience of controul and subordination,—a spirit of slander and uncharitable censure,—a want of respect where respect is most due,—such an eager thirst for riches as cannot wait the gradual, yet never-failing, progress of commendable industry,—fortunes lost and families distressed by the mere operation of *chance*;—these, I fear

I fear, are some of the most striking features in the character of the present times.

If God severely punished those nations, who had only the imperfect light of reason, for acting contrary to its dictates; how can we, who have his will fully revealed to us, hope to escape his indignation if we persist in acting contrary to it? Where he affords the clearest light and the easiest means of knowledge, there likewise he expects the greatest and the most perfect obedience. The present distressed condition of the Jews may teach us not to depend too long upon his goodness, nor make too light of his avenging justice. He chose them for his own peculiar people, and raised them up into a mighty nation; and yet for their repeated sins, he spared not to punish his own inheritance. They are the living witnesses of his justice, dispersed over the whole earth as a lesson and warning to all the kingdoms of it. What can be more moving and pathetic than our Saviour's lamentation over Jerusalem? When he was come near and beheld the city, he wept over it, saying, if thou hadst known, even thou, in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. Nothing, sure, can be a stronger instance of God's favour to that people, than to see his only Son thus tenderly lamenting their misfortunes. But there was an indispensable necessity that satisfaction should be made to the divine justice; and since that city had killed his Prophets, and stoned those that were sent unto it, behold! its house was left unto it desolate.

Acts of publick humiliation at a time of general distress are parts even of natural religion, and were excercised upon the like occasion by those who were wholly unacquainted with revelation. The existence of a Being all-perfect, infinite in power, wisdom, and goodness, and the reality of his superintending Providence, are points capable of the clearest demonstration, and have ever been acknowledged by the universal consent of mankind. For the feeble voice of a few Atheists, whether real or pretended, cannot be heard, or ought not to be regarded, in opposition to the voice of universal reason, which speaks in all mankind, and the voice of universal nature, which proclaims in every part of the creation the power and goodness of the Creator. Whenever there was an appearance of such extraordinary signs as portended the wrath of Heaven, the state passed a decree that expiation should be made by publick prayer and solemn sacrifices; and to avert an impending national calamity, the people were prohibited from their ordinary recreations and employments. The temples of their Gods were crouded with humble supplicants, and their altars smoked with the blood of slaughtered victims. They were indeed mistaken both in the object and the means of divine worship, yet nature and reason pointed out to them that some kind of devout submission was indispenfibly necessary.

It is therefore no more than just and reasonable that we should in the most humble manner make a publick acknowledgment of those sins, by which we have publicly affronted the Majesty of God. As our disobedience to him hath been open and notorious, such

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likewise should be our submission. And we may well suppose that nothing will contribute more to appease his anger and restore us to his favour than the united prayers of a whole people offered up in the sorrow and sincerity of their hearts. When Jonah was sent to preach against Nineveh, the people, we read, believed God, and proclaimed a Fast, and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least. And not only were these outward tokens of humiliation and repentance publicly enjoined, but they were commanded to turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that was in their hands. They were sensible that no external professions, no formal appearances of sorrow, would avail them any thing, without an inward reformation of their hearts. In this consists that humiliation and repentance, which alone can reconcile us to an offended God, and without which all our Fasts and Prayers would be solemn Mockeries.

With wonder and adoration we trace the ways of Providence in the rise and fall of the Empires of the world. If we ask what is become of those cities and states, which once were so great and powerful, we shall find they are sunk into ruinous heaps, and reduced to almost nothing but a name. If we enquire into the cause of the extirpation of the inhabitants, we shall find it was their sins. They were raised up by God as the instruments of his Providence, and the remains of some of them are awful Monuments of his justice. So true and self-evident is the observation, that righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is the reproach, and, in the end, the destruction of any people. The nature and reason of the case itself will not only satisfy us as to this point, but history and antient facts in numberless instances confirm

confirm it. The Jewish nation we have already spoke of. Let us turn then to a people whose history is so conspicuous in the annals of Mankind, and affords the most instructive lessons. While the Romans retained their ancient virtue, public spirit, justice, sobriety, and industry, they prospered and flourished. Conquests poured in upon them, 'till they became the Masters of the world, and received tribute and homage from every quarter of it. But being softened by ease and enervated by luxury, virtue and publick spirit giving way to ambition, avarice, and self-interest, they soon fell into factions, seditions, and civil wars, which ended in the loss of their liberty, and the destruction of the state. Under the Emperors, as many of them, instead of being the protectors of mankind, were the disgrace of human nature, profligate and abandoned, so for the greater part were all orders and degrees of men amongst them. Virtue was no more regarded, merit was totally neglected, every thing was bought and sold, even the Empire itself sometimes to the highest bidder, and iniquity and corruption carried all before them. At length the ministers of God's vengeance the Goths, the Vandals, and other barbarous nations rushed in upon them like a flood, over-running the West, as the Saracens afterwards did the East, and smote this mighty Empire.

It were needless to adduce more examples, though many might be mentioned, of God's punishing and destroying unrighteous states and kingdoms, when they had filled up the measure of their iniquities. What hath been already said will I hope serve to shew, that communities as well as individuals depend on his over-ruling

Providence for support, and that mankind under a consciousness of this dependance have always endeavoured to conciliate his favour in times of publick disquietudes, by acts of humiliation and repentance.

Let me then call your attention to what more particularly relates to ourselves upon the occasion of this day's Solemnity, remembering that when the host goeth forth against our enemies, we are to keep ourselves from every wicked thing.

We are still involved in all the calamities of a civil war with our American Colonies. How these troubles began, by what artful and designing Leaders in that unhappy country they were afterwards fomented, and are by the same persons continued to this day, it would not become the Preacher in this place to attempt to investigate. It will be more within his province, to offer, with all due respect to such an Audience, those general remarks, which the complexion of the times and the present situation of things seem most naturally to suggest.

War, in whatever other light men may see it, is in a religious view a grievous and sore judgment. It is a calamity in itself most dreadful; and considering the treasure which is spent, and the blood which is spilt, often a burden too heavy to be borne even by those who gain the victory. What then must be the wretchedness of those countries which are the scene of action? Where rapine and violence rage without controul, and the land, which before them is as the garden of Eden, is behind them a desolate wilderness.

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These miseries will appear in still deeper colours, when we view the sword of divine justice drawn forth by the hand of civil strife; for in such a situation, inexpressibly unhappy, even the most brilliant victories, no otherwise desirable than as they may lead to a firm and indissoluble re-union, would at best afford us but a melancholy triumph. The blow we give recoils upon ourselves, and suppresses the exultation of success by the necessary consequence of it,—the misfortunes of the vanquished.

We cannot therefore sufficiently lament the occasion which now brings us to the house of God to humble ourselves before him. For when we consider that it is no common enemy that hath done us this dishonour and provoked us, not differing from us in language, not rivals in trade, not opposed to us in other interests;—but a people, whom 'till late it was our boast to call our brethren and friends;—a people, raised and cherished by the watchful care of the Parent State through a long succession of years, protected by it at a vast expence of blood and treasure during a long and stubborn war, and now deriving the very means of resistance from that protection;—We must undoubtedly feel a weight of affliction proportioned to the enormity of their ingratitude as well as of our own offences, which have brought down so great a judgment upon us, it may be, for our own ingratitude towards Heaven.

But this is no day of accusation. The mistaken multitude we must in charity forgive, for they, it may reasonably be supposed, know not what they do. If their Leaders entered upon the horrid

rid scene with the deliberate purpose of preventing all accommodation, and of pushing their rebellious resistance to the last extremity; then, the calamities of their American brethren, the miseries still to be apprehended from the continuance of a civil war, and the agonies which every good man feels for the distresses of his country, must be laid to their charge.

The spirit of a people is not apt to arise in favour of such measures as tend to rob them of their tranquillity, and call them from the mild endearments of social and domestic happiness. Nor are they capable of forming plans to overturn a settled establishment, and to invent a new system. In all attempts of that kind, the many are led by the few; and the chief actors are most likely to succeed when they artfully conceal their real intentions from the too credulous multitude. Hence it is that unfavourable reports and evil surmises sprung up and increased amongst them, and that the true intentions of the Parent State have not even yet been able to reach our American brethren. Besides, minds strongly agitated and inflamed will not readily yield to conviction, nor amidst the rage of popular tumult attend to the still voice of reason.

The time, we flatter ourselves, is approaching, when the same Power who stilleth the raging of the sea will allay the madness of the people; for the sound of Peace and Conciliation is gone forth, and will soon reach that Land which stands so much in need of its healing influence. We may therefore reasonably expect, and every good man must devoutly wish, that a sense of mutual interests,

terests, a remembrance of past services and friendship, and certain knowledge of the benevolent intentions of Government, will at length disperse the clouds which have hung over us, enlighten and lead us into the paths of peace, and bring back to the wide extended dominions this *one Tribe which is lacking in our Israel*.

Once more secure under the protection of the Parent State, in the hour of tranquillity they will naturally be led to reflect, how dangerous it may prove, in cases within the reach of legal redress, to be wanting in due respect to subordination, and the sacred barrier of our laws. Alterations in civil establishments are then safest, when gently and gradually conducted by mild, prudent, and constitutional expedients; which, whenever they become necessary, cannot escape the notice of wise and able men, by whom they will be at the proper time adopted, improved, and established. It is upon this principle that our excellent Constitution hath, at different periods, been embellished and strengthened, and from thence the fair Fabrick may, in a great measure, be said to derive its present acknowledged beauty and perfection.

Long may it continue to be the pride and bulwark of a free and loyal people!—It must be owned that the late commotions have been violent; but the Edifice being upon a rock, its foundations remain unshaken.

Let us then, at this very awful crisis, the most important perhaps in its consequences of any yet recorded in the annals of this country, unite with one heart and mind to promote the things which belong unto our common welfare. Laying aside every partial and private consideration, let our unanimity add
strength

strength to the endeavours of those who watch over us ; and as by concord a small state may become great, may we never be a lesson to the kingdoms of the world, how much by discord a great one may be diminished.

To conclude ;—though we have every thing to hope from the integrity and wisdom of his Majesty's councils, yet let not the nation be wanting to itself ; let not our humble supplications for the divine favour end with this day, but be repeated upon every proper occasion ; because habitual devotion, besides its being acceptable to the supreme Being, hath a natural tendency to produce a reformation in our lives. By such means we may soon expect a completion of the ardent wishes of our most gracious Sovereign, who never sought for success in war, but to secure to all his people the blessings of peace, rescue the deluded Colonies from a state of anarchy, and, as the situation of public affairs would gradually permit, restore them to the invaluable privileges of the British Constitution.

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